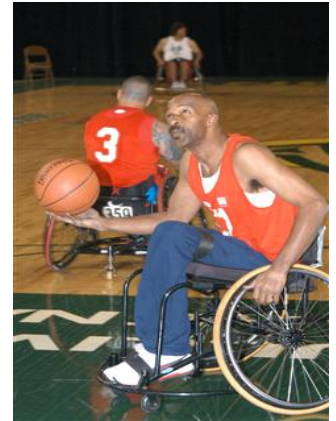




Athlete Profile (Local)

Michael Thomas – Welcome to the Life!



Michael Thomas is a 53-year-old Army veteran who served his country during the Vietnam era, from 1969-1971. Although he was born in Chicago, Thomas grew up in Detroit. It was there, in 1999, that a gunshot wound to the lumbar spine resulted in a spinal cord injury that put him in a wheelchair forever. Following his injury, Thomas received care in the spinal cord injury unit at the VA Medical Center in Milwaukee. Later, he moved to Milwaukee to stay. He says, “I loved the care in Milwaukee so much that I decided to make it my home.”

Classified as a paraplegic, Thomas has competed in five National Veterans Wheelchair Games since 2002. Although basketball is his favorite sport, he has also competed in other events such as field, softball, swimming and the wheelchair slalom, a challenging obstacle course. Still, basketball remains his true love. “I was a basketball star in high school back in the day, and all of the girls loved to come to see me play,” he says.

Like many wheelchair athletes, Thomas loves competing in the event. “I live for the Games,” he says. “I keep in top shape all year round by playing basketball for a local team called the ‘Milwaukee Thunder,’ made up of all types of disabled players. We practice on Wednesdays and play on Saturdays.” The training must work – Thomas returned with a silver medal from the Games last year – in basketball, of course.

The yearly Games remind Thomas of a large reunion, where he sees other veterans just like himself every year. One year, he had a special surprise when he met one of his old Army friends who had been stationed with his unit. “I will never forget that feeling – I was so happy to see him,” Thomas says. “It had been 32 years since we had last seen each other, and to this day we keep in touch.”

At the National Veterans Wheelchair Games this year in Milwaukee, Thomas wants to welcome all of the newcomers to the life they will lead after having a spinal cord injury. “It is a different life but it is still a life,” he says. He wants all of his teammates to know that they are coming to *his* house this time – and that he has the home court advantage! As a member of the local team of Wisconsin wheelchair athletes, he hopes the Games in Milwaukee will be the best ever and that all of the participants will, like him, want to come back every year.

In addition to basketball, this year Thomas plans to compete in the 100-meter track, softball and weightlifting events. At the 2005 National Veterans Wheelchair Games, Michael Thomas said, “When you compete in the Games, you begin to see that there are no losers at this event, only winners.” Of course this time, having that home court advantage can’t hurt either.